

PANACHE

W. P. Kinsella



Me and Frank Fence-post and a few other guys been taking a course the government offer on how to be mechanics. The first year of the course was just about over and Mr. Nichols, our English instructor and counselor was helping some of us write job application letters so we maybe work and earn some money in the summer.

I have to write Frank Fence-post's letters because he is only able to write most of his name.

"Hey, Silas," Frank he say to me, "if we get these letters wrote up all spelled right and all, wouldn't it be better if we could keep them from knowing we is Indians?"

"How we gonna do that?" says Tom Pony. "With names like Silas Ermineskin, Donald Bobtail and Rufus Firstrider, it not going to be so hard for them to guess."

Frank, he finally decide to sign his letters J. Frank Fencepost, so it sound important just like the Mayor of Wetaskiwin, who is Mr. J. William Oberholtzer. We all laugh a lot about that, but Mr. Nichols he say that us guys will maybe get to work in a mill somewhere but they put Frank in Public Relations, whatever that is.

The last talk that Mr. Nichols gave us in English class is one that I never forget. It is Mr. Nichols who get me to write down stories and he say if I keep on maybe someday I write some good enough to get printed.

His lecture was all about a French word called "panache," which he say is, and I write it down real careful: *the ability to exude the effect of a plume on a helmet.*

He show us pictures of knights with big curled feathers above their armour, and he tell us that anybody can act like he got them feathers. If we stand tall and have the right attitude then we can have panache and look like we warriors wearing a war bonnet and holding a lance, even if we really just got on jeans and a T-shirt. Then we look at pictures of Indian chiefs and Mr. Nichols say that they got more nobility and panache than knights ever had. I make sure I remember what it is he tells us but I don't figure I have a chance to use it for maybe a long time.

Me and Frank and Tom Pony all got hired by a coal mine out near Jasper, Alberta, and a good long way from our reserve here at Hobbema. The mine is at a place called Luscar, what used to be a town but ain't anymore, and the mine ain't underground like you would suppose but is up top and called a strip mine. The mine is called Cardinal Coal Mines and Frank he figures that it must be owned by Indians. We got about twenty families named Cardinal on the reserve and we guess maybe one of them run it.

The nearest town is called Hinton, and the three of us take the bus up there and get us a basement room and board with a white lady who says we should call her Gran. Her husband runs the movie machine at the picture show and he say he let us guys in free to all the movies.

"That's really white of you," Frank says. I kick his ankle and when we alone I tell him not to make fun of these people 'cause they is really trying to be nice on us. None of us ever been in a white people's house before—they even got three goldfish in a big glass jar.

Gran, she serves us more food than I ever seen before, and she say she gonna have to fatten us up, especially Tom Pony who is little and got hollow cheeks. She say he looks like he never had a good meal in his life.

Boy, this is sure nice people, and things look good for us until the first day we start work.

We have to take a company bus about forty kilometres out to the mine and boy do the guys we gonna work with ever look funny at us on the way out.

"Maybe they don't have no Indians in this part of the country," whispers Frank.

"Maybe they do," say Tom Pony.

I never even dream there are places like this mine. They got there what they call trucks but they is three men tall and the cab sits off to one side like they missed when they put it together. I am almost two metres tall but I don't even come to the top of one wheel. These trucks go up and down narrow little trails and then back up to the very edge of what sure look like hell to me, and

dump their load. The rocks go down, what the foreman say is over a hundred fifty metres into a pit that he says been burning for maybe twenty years. There is smoke hang around over everything, make it like it cloudy all the time.

We don't have to drive the trucks and I sure glad about that. We just gonna do odd jobs. That is if we ever get to work, 'cause when the shifts change everybody have a big meeting with the foreman. We don't have to figure too hard to guess that it about us.

All the men wear bright red coveralls and yellow hardhats and what with the dust and smoke hang around all over, it sure remind me of a picture I seen once of all the devils in hell.

"We ain't gonna have no so-and-so Indians work here," says a big man with a beer belly and yellow hair.

"I don't like it no better than you, Gunderson," say the foreman. Then he goes into a long story about how the government gives money to the mine, but if the mine takes the money it got to hire some guys like us.

They argue for a long time. Gunderson say there no way the men gonna work if we work.

"Look," say the foreman, "I'm gonna put the tall one up in the tower with a pencil and the other two on odd jobs. You won't even know they're here."

Gunderson went and had a pow-wow with the other men.

"As long as they don't touch none of the equipment. We don't want them to screw nothing up. It's dangerous enough here without guys like that working on our machines." I can tell right then that we ain't gonna get to do no mechanic work even though that's what we been trained to do for the last year.

What happens is we don't get to do much of anything. I count the loads each truck dumps but some other guy counts them too. Frank sweep the floor of the garage and when he finish he sweep it again. Tom Pony stand out near where the trucks back up. He is supposed to wave them back and signal them when to stop which would be an important job except that all the drivers they been working here a long time and they put the truck where they want it and don't pay no attention to Tom except for a couple

of them I think tried to run him over once or twice.

"They'll get used to you in a few days," said Gran, while she was packing us the biggest lunches I ever seen with sandwiches made with real ham and fresh tomatoes. We only been here a couple of weeks and already Tom Pony look like he is put on weight.

"You just seem a little strange to them," Gran went on. "Once they get to know you everything will be okay." Gran, she remind me of my Ma who is always believe everything gonna be okay too, no matter how bad it get.

"They is plenty strange to us too," says Frank, "Don't nobody ever think of that?"

Gunderson, he have all the men except us sign their names on a paper sheet that he gonna send to the head office of the mine, so they have to get rid of us.

But the paper it never got sent because that afternoon Gunderson have his accident. I was way up in the tower so all I could do was watch. Gunderson is back his truck up to the edge of the pit but he come up real fast try to scare Tom Pony and go a metre too far and the rock start to crumble away from under the back wheels. He tries to pull forward but all that keeps the truck from going down is the forward pull of the wheels.

"Jump!" yells the foreman, but Gunderson is all tangled up and hangs there like a monkey on a stick I seen once at the Royal American Shows at the Ponoka Stampede. Some say that Gunderson got his overalls caught on the gearshift or that he had his boot jammed under the brake. It depend who you listen to tells the story, but he is sure one long time getting out of that cab.

What happens next I don't believe if I don't see. Tom Pony been waving him back and he is right at the edge looking at where the rock breaking away. Afterward, everybody say how Tom is a hero and all, and what a good Indian he is because he save Gunderson's life even though he trying to get Tom fired. I don't think Tom even knew who was in the cab. But I put myself in his place and figure that if that truck go over, guess who gonna get blamed, the Indian or the driver? I figure Tom was more trying to

save our jobs than anything else, but I never tell anybody else that. It funny how people, even big tough ones like Gunderson and his friends, like to believe in heroes.

Tom Pony he get right out on the edge of the pit dig in his foot and push against the wheel of the truck. I only heard about someone show strength like he did then.

On the reserve they tell about one time Moses Louis rolled his Volkswagen on top of himself and Mrs. Louis she picked it up off him 'cause she was the only one around and if she didn't he'd of died.

"Jump!" the foreman keeps yelling and someone is climb up and pull on Gunderson's one leg that hangs out the door, but no one goes back to help Tom Pony. He just pushes against the back wheel and from way up where I am I can tell that for a few seconds that truck stops crawling backward. Those few seconds give Gunderson enough time to untangle and finally he is jump clear. Tom Pony ain't so lucky. He got no place to jump clear to and the rig goes over the bank and takes Tom with it.

That night we is all sit around the bar down to the Timberline Hotel in Hinton. Gunderson is our best friend now and so is just about everybody else. They sure buy us a lot of beer and say what good guys we are. Gunderson say that there should be a memorial of some kind for Tom Pony, even if they never gonna be able to get his body up out of the burning pit. He pass the hat around the bar and collect a whole lot of bills, mostly tens and twenties.

"We're going to buy a stone and put it on the side of the hill by the mine entrance for everybody to see," Gunderson say. Everybody is some happy.

"Hey, Partner," Frank say to me, "you figure they figure if they buy us enough beer it gonna bring Tom Pony back to life?"

Me and Frank went with Gunderson the next morning down to the tombstone place. Gunderson talked to a man in a suit and a bright red tie who pointed out the different stones in the yard.

"This here's the best we can get for the money we got,"

Gunderson says finally, point at a shiny black stone with what looked like little flecks of gold in it.

"It's okay with me," I say. It be better if we give the money to Tom Pony's mother, but I don't say that.

"What do you want on it?" say the man in the suit.

"Why couldn't we just take the stone back with us to Hobbema?" say Frank. "We could take it on the bus. I buy it a ticket myself and it can sit beside me just like Tom Pony did on the way down."

I was trying to think of what to put on the stone.

"His name?" said the man.

"Tom Pony."

"Thomas..."

"No. Just Tom."

"Date of birth?"

Frank and me looked at each other. "He was eighteen," I said.

"You want an inscription? You get up to six words free."

I couldn't think of anything for a while, then I remember Mr. Nichols' last lecture to us.

"Panache," I say.

"What's that?" said the tombstone man, who was making notes with a pencil in a scribbler.

"It's what I want on Tom Pony's tombstone. Panache."

I had to spell it for him about six times before he got it right.

"What is it anyway, some kind of Indian word?"

"Yeah, I think it is," I say.